

The War in Crimea.

The main thrust of this presentation is to link the aftermaths of the War in Crimea to the reforms in Russia during the 1860's and 1870's which gradually removed the special favored colonist status of the Germans in South Russia.

My special interest in Crimea stems from the fact that my mother was born there in 1923 – in a small Tatar village of about 100 people which no longer exists. (slide) In his 2010 book The Crimean War, A History, author Orlando Figes discusses the shifts in European politics which occurred as a result of the War in Crimea. The changes within Russia had serious consequences for the Germans who lived there.

Note the subtle change in my wording of the title of this presentation – the War in Crimea, versus the Crimean War. You are already familiar with particular aspects of the War in Crimea – ie. the siege and total destruction of the naval base of Sevastopol in southwest Crimea, the Battle of Balaklava where the Charge of the Light Brigade occurred, and the legendary work of the famous nurse Florence Nightingale. But in actuality, this war had nothing to do with Crimea itself. Crimea was merely the site where the major military battles of this European war occurred.

The War in Crimea began as just another in a continuing series of conflicts between Russia and Turkey. For nearly 100 years, Russia had been chipping away at the northern edges of the Ottoman Empire around the Black Sea. The steady decline of the Turkish Empire allowed Russia nearly free reign on the Black Sea, from where it could potentially control river traffic at the mouth of the Danube River, and more importantly, the ship traffic through the Straits of Bosphorus at Constantinople (today Istanbul). Britain was worried that Russia's growing naval strength on the Black Sea could spill over into the Mediterranean Sea, thus endangering Britain's important trade routes into India and China.

(slide of trade routes) By the mid nineteenth century the silk and spice routes from India and China, both by land and by sea, were well developed. Trade with the Far East was a major component of the European economy, and European countries fiercely defended their areas of influence along these routes. France became involved because it wished to curb the growing military influence of Russia within Europe. Britain reluctantly felt it necessary to support the Ottoman Empire, if only for it to serve as a buffer to Russian imperial expansionism. So this War in Crimea was, first of all, about nineteenth-century European empires.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, ten million Orthodox Greeks, Bulgarians, Albanians, Moldavians, Wallachians, and Serbs were subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Liberating these Orthodox Believers from Muslim rule shaped the military and economic aspects of Russia's foreign policy. Like all the Tsars before him, Nicholas I felt ordained by God to act as Protector

of Orthodox Believers wherever they lived. The Black Sea coastline became the battle-ridden frontier between Orthodoxy and Islam. So secondly, this war was about religion.

In 1852, as a result of the interfering influence of the Catholic French Emperor Louis Napoleon III, the Sultan restricted access of Orthodox Christians to the sacred sites of the Holy Lands. At that time, more Russians than all other nationalities combined, made annual pilgrimages to the Holy Lands. Russia protested by sending 100,000 troops into the Lower Danube principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, parts of the Ottoman Empire. This was the first aggressive military move which led to the war in Crimea.

The Tsar was able to justify this move via several European treaties with Constantinople allowing Russia the right to provide protection for Orthodox Believers living in the Ottoman Empire. Nikolai mistakenly assumed that Britain and Austria would not interfere. And he could never have envisioned England cooperating with France. The occupation (some would call it an invasion) by Russia of the lower Danube territories aroused powerful Muslim sentiments of Turkish nationalism. Violent anti-Russian demonstrations occurred in Constantinople. Counting on support from Europe, and encouraged by France, the Sultan declared war on Russia on 04 October 1853, demanding that it withdraw from the lower Danube territories.

Knowing full well that Russia's Sevastopol Fleet had complete control of the Black Sea, Turkey dispatched a small military fleet towards Georgia from its naval base on the south shore of the Black Sea at Sinope. Russia considered it an act of war, and subsequently sank the entire fleet with heavy loss of life. It was a calculated move by Turkey to garner European support. As the Sultan had predicted, the British press went ballistic. Hysterically the newspapers demanded that Parliament move to stop barbaric and aggressive Russia before it trampled all over Europe, bringing an end to civilization and Christianity as they knew it. Still Britain held back, while Napoleon threatened to move the French Fleet onto the Black Sea, with or without British cooperation. Britain and France were to become unlikely allies in the military actions which followed. Thus, in late December a joint British and French naval force maneuvered into the Black Sea, ostensibly to protect Turkish shipping. It was not until April 1854 that the western powers formally declared war against Russia.

So who was the aggressor: Russia, Turkey, France, or Britain?

In the final analysis, the War in Crimea was a European war against Russia with the un-stated objective of reducing Russia's size and power within Europe. The war was never about protecting Turkey. Public opinion, whipped into a frenzy by the British press, forced the weak Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen to move against "those barbaric Russians". French Catholics demanded that Orthodoxy be pushed out of Europe altogether and Napoleon longed to restore France's former prestige in Europe. Austria feared Russia's interference on its southern flank. The Tsar, faithful to his divine duty, felt he had no choice but to wage a holy war for the liberation of Orthodoxy from Muslim rule.

So how did the war front move onto the Crimean Peninsula? In Wallachia and Moldavia, Russia and Turkey basically fought to a standstill, neither side willing to commit its full forces. There were more casualties from cholera, typhus and malnutrition than there were from battle. Finally near the end of June, 1854, Austria served an ultimatum on the Tsar to withdraw from the lower Danube vicinity. To back up its demand, Austria had amassed 100,000 troops along its southern frontier, so concerned it was that Russia's presence in the Danubian territories might become permanent. Meanwhile the uneasy alliance of British and French troops was bivouacked at Varna (Bulgaria), 50,000 men waiting for orders. The Tsar had no choice but to retreat. Russia's army re-crossed the Danube and moved back towards Bessarabia. The war could have ended at this point. The Sultan had demanded that Russia withdraw from the lower Danube. Russia acquiesced. The Allies could have sued for peace. So why then was there a war in Crimea at all?

Simply put, the western powers felt they had been deprived of the satisfaction of physically punishing Russia. British and French troops had already spent six months away from home without firing a shot. Public opinion at home was not willing to accept a peace with Russia's military might still intact. A "Russophobia" had taken root, which demanded that the perceived Russian threat to the security of European civilization be ended, once and for all. The British War Cabinet decided the quickest and easiest way to end this threat was to destroy Russia's military capacity on the Black Sea. An invasion of Crimea and the destruction of Russia's Black Sea Fleet and harbor at Sevastopol would strike a decisive blow against Russia. The capture of Sevastopol would be Napoleon's revenge for 1812. So on 07 September 1854 a flotilla of 400 ships carrying 70,000 troops with their munitions and supplies departed Varna and sailed towards Crimea.

The War in Crimea would be a disaster on all sides. Lack of planning, lack of existing services and shortage of supplies in Crimea, lack of transportation facilities, difficult terrain, virtually everything about the location of the impending military conflagration was not conducive to an effective conduct of war. Even the Russians did not have proper maps of Crimea. Disease and the virtual absence of medical care for the sick and wounded would cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Lack of planning for a winter campaign turned into a catastrophe for the troops.

They landed south of Eupatoria, which surrendered without a shot being fired. Thousands of Tatars rushed to the sea shore to welcome their Turkish Muslim brethren, treating them as liberators. The Russians quickly learned they were woefully un-prepared for the scale of the assault being waged against them. The first engagement occurred at the Alma Heights above the River Bulganak, September 19-20 with as many as 10,000 dead and wounded. This was only a few kilometers from the original German colony of Kronental. The retreating Russians abandoned their own wounded, and the drastic lack of medical help in Crimea for the wounded of all nations quickly became a sobering aspect of this war. Again, the war could have ended here.

Less than 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Sevastopol, the Allied forces could easily and quickly have captured the town and naval base before the Russians had time to mount an effective defense. But with virtually no reconnaissance ahead of time, the joint-Allied Command had no real grasp of the way forward. Instead, French and English commanders argued about the best approach to Sevastopol. It gave the Russians time to scuttle half of the Sevastopol fleet of ships across the harbor entrance, preventing an invasion by sea. (monument to the sunken ships) And so began the bitter twelve month siege of Sevastopol with appalling losses on all sides. The Allied forces had dithered just long enough to allow the Russians time to “dig in”. Hemmed in and out-“gunned”, they hung on for 349 days before they abandoned Sevastopol 12 September 1855. They set fire to the town, sank their remaining ships, and melted away. The Russians never surrendered.

During the year-long siege of Sevastopol, 120 kilometers of trenches were dug, 150 million gunshots exchanged, while 5 million assorted artillery shells were hurled back and forth. One hundred and thirty thousand men died in the defense of Sevastopol. The total manpower losses of the war through battle or illness and disease are estimated at 750,000. Historians estimate that two-thirds of them were Russian. The French lost about 100,000 while the British losses were 20,000, simply because they committed far fewer soldiers to this war. Turkey lost half of its troops, or about 120,000 soldiers. No one has ever put a number on the estimated civilian losses in Crimea, in the Balkans, or the Caucasus. The Crimean War was the first to involve modern rifles, railways, steamships, the telegraph, wartime journalism and photography. It was the first war in which the public received daily reports from the war zone. And it was the first war to be documented through the photographs of British photographer Roger Fenton. (slides of some war photos)

Regrettably there is scant mention of the German farmers of South Russia in existing literature regarding the War in Crimea. We know they provided transportation for troops and supplies into the war zone, and they transported wounded back to Simferopol, to Perekop, even back as far as Molotschna. We know the Germans sold all manner of supplies to the Russian army – flour, grain, beef and lamb for the troops, wagons, harness, horses, oxen, hay and fodder, blacksmith services for wagons, etc. Prices soared during the Crimean War as everyone took advantage of the steep demand for food and fodder, equipment and supplies, whatever was required in an active theatre of war. Barley, corn, hay, fresh meat, all were in short supply, and not easily available because of the poor transportation network. Driving prices even higher, no agriculture was possible at all in the vicinity throughout the fall of 1854 and through 1855. As well, the requirements of a war economy meant that the numbers of horses and oxen available for use in agriculture in the colonies had declined considerably.

In his book, “My Home on the Crimean Steppe”, David Weigum writes that the lack of a railway caused much difficulty in bringing Russian troops to meet the enemy, and in the transporting of supplies and the evacuation of the wounded. Page 12: “My grandfather often told us about those times and how they had to help with men and horses. They lived in Kronental, only 40

kilometers from Sevastopol, and could hear the artillery fire. He told of the quartering of Russian and more particularly of foreign troops, French and English, and of the ships on the sea only 12 kilometers away. The village had to be evacuated several times.” Residents hid in the valleys and ravines. Eupatoria was completely occupied by the Allied landing forces – 70,000, a presence that could not help but be noticed only a few kilometers away in Kronental.

Weigum continues on Page 87: “In Kronental the thunder of the cannons could be clearly heard. . . now and then, soldiers, mostly officers, came into the village. And they were attracted [mainly] by the good Kronental wine lying in such quantities in the cellars. The more [money] the villagers asked for it, the more it was bought. . . . These [officers] were just fine gentlemen and apparently didn’t have to worry about cost. At that time our grandfathers saw a lot of gold and many became rich during that war. . . . In the Crimean War . . . our colonist sons did not yet have to serve in the army. They did, however, have to perform all sorts of auxiliary services, to transport war material, provisions and wounded soldiers. . . . In 1854 there was still no railway that connected the Crimea with Russia. It was probably because of the transportation difficulties that the Czar lost the war, in spite of the heroic courage of his soldiers.”

For the first time since the founding of their settlements in South Russia, the Germans were dragged directly into the middle of a war. The Taurien colonies on both sides of the Molotschna River, and those in the Crimea, were on the front lines of a country at war. The Molotschna colonies lie on the direct path of the Russian troop columns as they headed south for Crimea. The entire logistical ordinance of supplies had to travel this route, the already terrible condition of which was made even worse by the many thousands of conveyances. Certainly the terrible condition of this road was a reason for the defeat of the Russian army in Crimea. Replenishment of munitions and supplies was severely hampered by the poor network of roads and railways in Russia.

The Mennonites of Molotschna district, as well as the Prischib Lutherans, established several military hospitals which cared for thousands of wounded soldiers. In addition, many hundreds of men with minor war injuries were cared for in private homes. High-ranking officers preferred quarters among the Mennonites of Molotschna. Giesinger, page 56: “When the war was over, many colonists received special commendations from the Tsar in the form of medals and gifts, in recognition of their contributions to the war effort.”

The German colonies of Odessa district and Bessarabia were also very much aware of the war. In 1853 they had witnessed the huge movements of Russian troops westward to invade and occupy the Lower Danube. The Germans around Nikolaev knew first-hand about the bombardment and occupation by Allied forces of the military stronghold of Ochakow, southwest of Nikolaev.

In terms of its consequences, the Crimean War could be considered the most important military conflict of the nineteenth century, perhaps even more far-reaching in its consequences, than the

Napoleonic Wars. But the War in Crimea solved nothing. What did Britain win? What did France gain? Or Austria? Turkey won a return to the pre-war status-quo, if that can be called a “win”. Russia won nothing except the re-instatement of the rights of the Orthodox in the Holy Lands. Yet the so-called Crimean War would have lasting consequences for all of the participants.

England. In England, the public’s awareness of so many details of the war, particularly the failures and disasters of the campaigns, exposed the myth of the superiority of the aristocracy. The war had been badly managed, both by the government and by the military administration, and the constant press coverage had kept the public informed. In the future, the principles of competence and meritocracy would gradually replace the privileges of birth, not only in the military, but in the very social fabric of Britain. For the first time in history, the ordinary soldier was raised to hero status. A new middle class would emerge in Britain after the Crimean War, and who better to bolster a new confidence in self-reliance and work ethics than the returning heroine Florence Nightingale. She became a legend in a Britain that was looking for something of the Crimean War worth celebrating.

France. Even though France was one of the major participants, the story of the Crimean War has long been forgotten there. France gained nothing except perhaps some momentary prestige, and was embarrassed to realize that Britain had used France as a pawn. Nearly 100,000 French soldiers had died in order to satisfy Britain’s aggressive imperialism in the Black Sea region. While there are numerous Crimean War memorials throughout villages in Britain, there are none in France.

Ottoman Empire. While the 1856 peace negotiations preserved the territorial boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean War and its aftermath exposed a reluctant Turkish society to western influences. The influx of Muslim refugees from the Russian Empire (most notably the Crimean Tatars) and the increased contact with foreigners brought new ideas and new technologies into the Ottoman world. The costs of war had resulted in huge debts which came to be financed by western banks, particularly those in Britain. Development of railways, telegraphs and newspapers meant a growing dependence on foreign capital investments . The growing western presence and the policy of religious toleration enforced by the Paris Peace Treaty soon created a backlash among young Turkish nationalists who keenly felt the dilution of the Islamic identity of the Ottoman Empire. Here lay the seeds for the modern state of Turkey which would emerge after World War I. The Ottoman Empire would not survive the invasion of western values which followed the Crimean War.

Austria. In the end, the country which was least involved in the actual combat, Austria, would lose the most. Slowly Austria would be isolated by her former alliance partners. Russia particularly felt betrayed. Russia never forgave Austria for siding with the Ottoman Muslims. Russia turned to Prussia and supported Otto von Bismarck in his drive to create a new Germany. The break-up of the old Austria-Russia alliance allowed the emergence of new nation states in

Germany, Italy and Romania. And in 1914, Russia came to the defense of Serbia after Austria invaded, which began World War I. This war would end the monarchies of Russia, Austria and Germany. World War I also finally brought an end to the Ottoman Empire.

Russia. Russia never officially declared war in this conflict. Russia felt that it had acted only as a defender against foreign invaders on its soil, totally ignoring Russia's initial occupation of the lower Danube. Nevertheless all sides willingly entered peace negotiations spearheaded by Austria and France. Russia knew it had lost the war, and it willingly agreed to the Black Sea as non-military neutral naval territory. Russia also gave up a portion of western Bessarabia, thus giving up any territory along the Danube River. This was designed to reduce Russia's influence in the lower Balkans, an important condition of peace, as far as Austria was concerned. Russia felt itself very much the victim in this war.

The Crimean War most affected Russia. While the results were a temporary humiliation, there emerged also a national pride in the defenders of Sevastopol, which owed much to the writings of Lev Tolstoy. Most of you will recognize the name of this famous Russian writer, but you might not know that he was a low-ranking officer with the Russian army in Crimea whose writing career began with his observations of the war. Out of the sense of betrayal that Europe had chosen to support Muslims rather than Orthodox Christians, there arose a new resentment against the West and an isolation that caused Russia to turn its back on Europe. To the Russian population which did not understand the complicated background of events that led to the confrontation in the southwest corner of Crimea, the war appeared as an act of plain "bully-ness" against Russia by the western powers. This war ignited a strong "anti-West" attitude not just in the Russian court but in the Russian population as well. A new sense of "Russianness" grew out of the realization that Russia had stood alone simultaneously against Europe and the Ottoman Turks, and had survived virtually unscathed. And from this new sense of nationalism grew the most dramatic reforms of nineteenth century Russia.

Since the time of Peter the Great, the Tsars had seen Russia as a European nation. But the Crimean war caused Russia to retreat from Europe. Russia's exports to Europe had been blockaded during the military conflict, alienating Russia, and convincing Russia that it had to grow its empire elsewhere. As a consequence, it sought to expand its boundaries by looking east beyond the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea into Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgystan, in a drive that would only end at Vladivostok on the Pacific coast.

After the Crimean War, Russia became again a Slavic nation. This new Russian nationalism would become a disaster for the Germans living in the Russian Empire. While loyal to the Tsars, the Germans never really considered themselves as Russians. In fact, many feel the Germans maintained an aloofness, a superior attitude about themselves and often considered themselves "better" (ie. culturally more sophisticated) than the Russians. Their economic success and their identifiable uniqueness within Russia would later make the Germans easy targets for repressions.

The military humiliation in Crimea exposed the incompetence of the military command, the technological backwardness of the army and the navy, and the inadequate network of roads and railways which had caused enormous supply problems for the men in the trenches. The war also highlighted not only the poor condition and illiteracy of the serfs who made up the armed forces, but also the inability of the serf economy to sustain a country at war against more industrialized nations. And finally, to a growing body of dissidents, this war illustrated the failures of an autocratic monarchical system of government.

The first step in the modernization of Russia's armed forces was tied to the overhaul of the serf economy. In 1861 Tsar Alexander II freed twenty-three million serfs of their bondage to the landowners. It was a major structural change to the way the marketplace functioned in Russia. A frenzy of railway building followed, designed not only to support the military, but also to foster trade and economic development. A new focus on education for all classes, including now the serfs, was seen as key to the improvement of military training and recruitment. The new education reforms would eventually force all schools to use the Russian language. Military reform led to compulsory conscription. Reforms to the system of local government administration and to the legal system removed the relative autonomy which the German colonies had heretofore enjoyed. The new Russia was being re-designed to favor Russians. Here one can clearly see the consequences for the German colonists of South Russia, all brought on by the War in Crimea.

While the serfs were now free, many became aimless un-employed wanderers, responsible for much of the looting and stealing which many of our ancestors cited as one reason for leaving Russia.

The first and most obvious changes effected by the war in Crimea occurred in Crimea itself. As the invading forces withdrew, Russians re-occupied the southern steppes of the peninsula. But Crimea would never be the same. Those Tatars who had not yet fled would soon be "encouraged" to leave by repressive taxations and other official sanctions. Thousands had already left for Constantinople, rightfully fearing reprisals from the Russians for their support of the Allies. Altogether two hundred thousand Tatars immigrated to Bulgaria, Romania and other parts of the Ottoman Empire in the years following the Crimean War. Russia pursued a new policy of "Christianizing" Crimea to serve as a borderland between Russia and the Muslim world. To fill the vacuum created by the departure of the Tatars, Russia now enticed colonists to Crimea from other parts of Russia and abroad with special rights and subsidies. Among those who responded were Christian refugees from Bulgaria and Bessarabia who took over hundreds of former Tatar villages and converted the mosques to churches. It was during the 1860's when many Germans from the Molotschna district, including Mennonites, moved onto the Crimean Steppe. While transporting supplies and wounded soldiers during the war, the Mennonites had observed the un-developed agricultural potential of the Crimean steppes. The consequences of the War in Crimea include the opportunity for expansion by the Germans who would eventually dominate the agricultural industry in Crimea up until 1914. They were joined by Greeks,

Bulgarians, Armenians, Russians, and others, totally transforming the ethnic and religious character of Crimea.

Russia began too the “Christianization” of the Caucasus, a process which today would be labeled as ethnic cleansing. It was a strategic move to protect commercial interests. Without the use of naval force on the Black Sea, Russia’s commercial ships could hardly expect to dock in unfriendly ports. More than a million Muslims were driven back from the coastal areas and out of the Caucasus allowing tens of thousands of Greeks from Moldavia and Bessarabia to move in during the decade following the Crimean War. The unrest in this region continues to plague Russia today, as witnessed by the 2008 uprisings in Georgia.

In summary, the War in Crimea set in motion a series of changes within Russia which would have negative consequences for the Germans of South Russia. Britain could have stood back and allowed the Tsar and Sultan to “duke” it out over the conflicts in Jerusalem. But Britain knew who would come out on top in the end. That is why Britain and France chose to step into the conflict. Did Britain and France really feel that threatened in the Mediterranean? Was the main British trade route to India that much in peril? Author Orlando Figes maintains that the Western powers simply decided they had to prevent the Russians from having any control over the entrance to the Mediterranean. The global scale of the so-called Crimean War upset the existing balance of power in Europe. It was a turning point in the histories of Russia, Europe and the Middle East. It set the stage for yet another Russo-Turkish war in 1877-78, World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the continuing unrest in the Balkans and in the Caucasus today. It proved to be an early turning point in the history of Germans of South Russia as well.